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KENNEDY LIBRARY INTERVIEW

of

Edward A. McDermott

Director, Office of Emergency Planning

by Charles Daly

May 22, 1964

This is Charles Daly. I am interviewing for the Kennedy Library Edward A. McDermott, the Director of the Office of Emergency Planning, now as he was in the Kennedy Administration. Ed, you and I have worked out a rough outline which I think we might follow, and I will make some notes of questions as we go along. We will start with your first associations with the President.

EAM: All right, I'll start drawing upon my recollection and covering these points as we have outlined them and you can maintain the chronological sequence by any suggestions or questions that you think are appropriate. My first association in relationship with President Kennedy was in 1950. At that time I was an associate in a law firm in Iowa and I was appointed by the Chairman of the United States Senate Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections as Chief Counsel of that Committee of the Senate. I came down to Washington at that time and served in that capacity for a period of approximately one year, during the course of which we conducted the very interesting investigation and hearings on the famous Tydings-Butler election controversy arising out of the 1950 election in the State of Maryland.

Daly: Cropped photo and all that?

EAM: That was the situation where there was the cropped photograph -- the composite photograph of the late Senator Tydings and Earl Browder and so on. John F. Kennedy was serving in the House of Representatives at that time and he had an interest in this case, as he had an interest in all facets and aspects of political life. I first met him during that period. My family was not here at that time - they remained in Iowa. I had a social relationship with the President during that approximate year and then I maintained a rather regular contact with him in ensuing years.

Daly: What would a social relationship be?

Then, of course, the events of the week end occurred and those events, because of the tremendous coverage that was accorded to the President's funeral and ceremonies associated with it by the television and radio networks, are well known to all Americans and to the world. I was present at the funeral Mass at St. Matthews Cathedral on Monday and the interment of his body at Arlington Cemetery later that day.

Daly: Ed, you want to go back now and discuss your activities in the Cuban crisis?

EAM: Well, many aspects of the Cuban crisis and the President's decisions growing out of that great threat to our national security and interest will be covered by others. I recall that on the week end prior to October 22, the President was on a tour that took him to the Midwest and was intended to take him to the West Coast. A situation was developing in Cuba that came to the attention of certain officials in Government the few days prior to Saturday, October 20. The decision was made by the President that morning in Chicago on Saturday to return to Washington rather than to continue his trip. I received a call at my home about noon from the Secretary of the National Security Council advising that a meeting was being scheduled with the President in the living quarters of the White House as soon as he touched down from the Midwest. We were given instructions for access to the White House; each member of the National Security Council and the others who were to participate in that discussion were to enter by different routes so as not to create undue concern or suspicions.

Daly: Did you know the subject of that meeting?

EAM: I knew that it was relating generally to Cuba but I did not know the specifics of it because at that time I had not personally been present at any of the intelligence briefings where developing information was made known to the President.

Daly: How did you know it was Cuba?

EAM: There had been some discussions in the intelligence agencies of government on the preceding day or possibly on Thursday that alerted

us to the problem in Cuba and I knew the information concerning it was being made available to the President. Because of general familiarity with potential trouble spots around the world it was sort of assumed that this would be Cuba.

Very shortly after the President arrived back in Washington, this meeting did convene in the living room of the President's family quarters on the second floor of the White House and at that time a rather detailed current briefing on the product of the aerial surveillance of Cuba was made available to the President. The discussions continued rather than began -- I say continued because there had been discussions earlier in the week -- discussions continued as to the various types of response and action that might be taken and of course, as others will report in more detail, those discussions and considerations ranged across the whole spectrum of alternative responses to this problem. I think here for the first time, to me, was demonstrated the real burdens of the Presidency in the seriousness with which the President approached this problem. I recall him leaving the discussion on a couple of occasions and stepping alone out onto the porch on the second floor of the White House looking across the South Lawn of the White House. On occasion he would stand out there alone for a few minutes and on another occasion, possibly on both occasions that I'm referring to he would be joined by Bobby, his brother. They would have a discussion -- the President would come back and join the group and would indicate a particular decision or judgment that he made. The reaction of the group in his absence was rather interesting because there was very little conversation when he was not present and in the moments or minutes, they seemed like hours, but in those minutes he would be alone out on the porch of the White House, any conversation that took place in the group that remained in the living room was in very low, hushed tones and not much was said in his absence.

Those discussions went on until Saturday night; -- we returned again to the White House for resumption of those discussions on Sunday and they continued until mid-afternoon on Sunday at which time the President's decision about the action to be taken, which he subsequently announced, became firm. Then the problem was the question of the necessary notification to our allies and to others and an expedited chronology of activities was developed. Everybody was given a specific assignment to discharge and various departments, State and Defense had their responsibilities and they went about the discharge of those responsibilities. Included in these arrangements, of course, were the

leaders of the Congress and your office, Chuck, your associates were very active in that area.

Daly: What specifically, other than participating in the NSC meeting, what specifically were you doing in your operations?

EAM: The problem here was that the President had a desire to endeavor to isolate this problem into its military and diplomatic aspects and to make sure that there was a maximum degree of readiness throughout the Governmental structure to deal with the consequences of his decision and any actions that might have been taken by Castro or the Soviets. On the other hand, he did not want a series of external actions taken by the Federal Government that would contribute to the concern of or panic the American people. So my task, consistent with our responsibilities in the Office of Emergency Planning, was to make sure that there was a degree of readiness in the nonmilitary area within the Federal structure to respond to any type of emergency that might develop. As I am sure others will agree, these were very tense hours and days. As we view it now, in retrospect, some might have difficulty recognizing that there was a feeling and a fear that nearly anything could happen as a result of the actions and threats that had been made and actions taken in Cuba and the President's determined response to it.

My responsibility was in the non-military area and I did proceed with the discharge of those responsibilities consistent with the President's instruction; shortly after the President made his statement to the American people on the evening of Monday, October 22, I called a meeting of the Cabinet members who had important nonmilitary responsibilities and discussed preparedness actions with them. They received a briefing on the background of the problem and I discussed with them organizational and other planning arrangements that had been made in Government to deal with the nonmilitary problems of a war emergency. We had actually a series of those meetings with Cabinet Officers. Those meetings were held in the Conference Room at the White House -- were not publicized -- because the actions that were being taken within this group were to develop a level of internal readiness that was adequate to meet any contingency but still make sure there were no external actions taken that would cause great public concern. At the same time, I called meetings of the heads of some 18 or 20 independent agencies that had had important nonmilitary emergency responsibilities and we made sure that the level of readiness to discharge those responsibilities was adequate.

Daly: You were operating under a broad mandate to get ready for whatever might develop?

EAM: Correct. The President directed on Sunday afternoon, as other directions were being given to those departments, that these general actions be taken. I reported on these various actions to the President through Ted Sorensen. I reported to him on meetings that had been held and worked closely with Ted Reardon, who was at that time Assistant to the President and specifically, was Secretary to the Cabinet and the activities of the Cabinet, so Ted Reardon was instrumental in assisting and setting up some of these meetings and participated in them.

An interesting event was taking place coincidentally on October 22nd. There is in Government an element called the National Defense Executive Reserve. The NDER is provided for by the Defense Production Act of 1950 and in this program the Federal Government has recruited from the private sector business, financial, labor, agricultural and other leaders who are people who would be called upon by the Federal Government to serve the Federal Government in one capacity or another in event of a war emergency in the discharge of some of these necessary Federal nonmilitary programs. There are some 3,000 leaders throughout the country that are members of this Executive Reserve. It had been planned--the President was interested in this program--for several months that there should be a national conference of the members of the NDER. About three months prior to October we began developing plans for this conference and actually called this conference and set the date for Monday, October 22. So there were about 1800 private sector leaders who were members of the NDER who were in Washington on that day.

Now, having charge of that program, I was very interested that this be an impressive program for the Executive Reservists. As we completed our plans for it, I made arrangements that the Executive Reservists be addressed at the Departmental Auditorium on Monday morning, October 22, by Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara and by General Maxwell Taylor. The agendas had been prepared, the programs had been printed, and I must say the participation of these distinguished leaders contributed to the attendance that we had at the meeting. The events of Saturday and Sunday, of course, made somewhat of a shambles of my "cast of characters" who were going to participate in this program.

When the Executive Reservists convened on that Monday morning, I had to leave other responsibilities in which I was engaged, and convene this meeting of Executive Reservists. They, I think, sensed the tenseness that existed here in Washington that week but of course nobody had any specifics of what was involved. I had to announce to them that due to circumstances beyond our control Secretary Rusk was not going to appear, Mr. McNamara was not going to appear, and General Taylor was not going to appear. We had arranged on short notice for very adequate substitutes.

. . . . .

As I was saying at the conclusion of the last tape, there was this dramatic experience of having to tell this assembled group that all scheduled speakers were going to be unavailable. While the group did not know the reason, and I could not tell them the reason, they had been exposed to the spirit and feeling of tension that had prevailed in Washington on that day and knew that something important was happening. To conclude that reference, that day's meeting went ahead as scheduled for this National Defense Executive Reserve group and it concluded with a dinner that was held at the Statler Hotel that night. That evening of Monday, October 22, the President went on national radio and television and announced to not only the people of the United States but to the people of the world, the nature of the problem and the nature of our responsive action. So the attendees at this conference actually heard the President's address to the American people just before we assembled in the Ballroom at the Statler for the concluding dinner.

Daly: Another thing here, regarding the crisis: Do you happen to know when the Cabinet, other than the obviously concerned members like McNamara and Rusk, when the Cabinet as a whole was advised of the nature of the crisis?

EAM: With the exception of the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Treasury, I believe that the balance of the Cabinet for security reasons was not advised of the nature of the threat or the decisions made by the President until about mid-afternoon on Monday, October 22, at which time the decisions having been made and certain implementing actions having been taken, a meeting of the Cabinet was called, at which time

the information was presented to them. I recall that while I was in the Departmental Auditorium earlier the morning of October 22nd, preparing to tell the assembled Executive Reservists that our program was substantially altered, I was talking with one member of the Cabinet who sensed the attitude of tenseness that prevailed but had no knowledge or information or indication of any kind as to what the problem was or what was really the provoking cause of this attitude.

Daly: Who was that member?

EAM: That was Secretary Hodges, Secretary of Commerce.

Now, in further response to these meetings of the Cabinet and meetings of the Independent Agency heads, a coordinating mechanism was established for the Federal family within the Office of Emergency Planning to make sure that no Department or Agency that had an independent responsibility and authority to take some preparedness action would take that action prematurely. We made arrangements that before any Department or Agency would take any preparedness action in response to this crisis that had an external effect, the proposed action would be reported to me as Director of the Office of Emergency Planning. On the basis of guidance available to me practically hourly from the National Security Council and from Ted Sorensen, and from other sources, I made a preliminary determination as to whether that proposed action was appropriate under the circumstances and consistent with the President's objective. I did not exercise a veto power because these actions, if any, were being proposed by Cabinet officers who had access to the President. If there was any disagreement as to an action to be taken the appeal was, of course, directed to the President. We did establish this coordinating mechanism and strangely enough, and to the satisfaction and surprise of many of us, it did work.

Daly: Was there any specific disagreement?

EAM: There were no specific disagreements but there were some proposed actions that were slowed down or deferred through this coordinating procedure that, had they not been deferred, conceivably could have contributed to public concern and we don't know then what the public response to the situation would have been. There were discussions, for example, about the necessity of closing the stock and



commodity exchanges to deal with the developing problem of gold flow and it was determined that was premature action at that time. The consequences of such a Federal action upon the American people and the attitude of the American people were fully considered and the action was not taken, and subsequently was determined not to be necessary. The Office of Emergency Planning was placed on a 24-hour duty at that time. Beginning on Sunday, the 21st, we operated on a 24-hour basis here in the Office of Emergency Planning for about a two-week period until the tensions fully subsided.

Another action that was taken involved part of our Continuity of Government program. We have arrangements for the prelocation, in the developing of an emergency, of certain essential Governmental personnel who would be able to carry on essential Governmental functions in an emergency situation. We were faced with the problem of how we were going to handle that. It was necessary that there be some relocation of personnel because the relocation facilities of the Federal Government had to be made ready and activated. On the other hand, any sort of mass exodus from Washington by Federal personnel would have possibly been a provocative act and certainly would have contributed to the concerns of the American people. I think that there was a very close tab being kept on where Federal officials were. I know that many Cabinet Officers and many agency heads, including my own home, received calls during those early days of the week of October 22nd to determine whether the dependents of the Government official were still in the city. These were calls from the Press. I think there was some anticipation that there might be a movement of dependents of key Government personnel---anticipatory to Government movement of key Government personnel themselves. The system worked well during that period. It provided many helpful lessons to us that I hope we can build upon, improve upon, and while I hope they will never have to be called upon again, I think it was a productive experience for the nonmilitary preparedness of Government.

Daly: Did you have at that time or previously, or subsequent to those events, did you have any discussion with President Kennedy regarding this relocation operation of White House, etc. ?

EAM: Yes, many discussions.

Daly: What was his reaction to that type of operation?

EAM: Throughout Government this was really the first opportunity in this Administration to face the realities of this type of problem. You know, one of the frustrating things about these responsibilities which are part of this agency is that most people don't want to think about it, talk about it, or hear about it. And interest only develops contemporaneously with the crisis but...

Daly: Was President Kennedy in that category?

EAM: The President, I think, was one of those that would have to plead guilty to that indictment to some degree also. That isn't true of all of the programs of this agency, such as some we discussed in earlier discussions, but when we got talking about these kinds of things his interest was lukewarm until the advent of the Cuban crisis and then, of course, in the post-Cuban situation, having been through it together, he was very interested in it. As a matter of fact, I reported to him--when things quieted down--I reported to him personally on the manner in which our responsibilities had been discharged in those tense days in the week of October 22nd, reported to him on the Cabinet and Independent Agency heads meeting. He was very interested not only in how it was done--his interest was to the point where on November 3rd, which was actually just about ten days after his action, he sent a memorandum to me in which he complimented the actions that had been taken. He said in that memorandum that it was important that we further improve the capability of the independent agencies to maintain or support the vital functions of the Federal Government and he asked that I continue to work closely with the Departments and Agencies concerned with these responsibilities, and that he would appreciate being kept advised as to further progress. That memorandum is one of the series of Presidential memoranda that will be going to the Library but he followed through on that memorandum of November 3rd and from time to time he did discuss with me the feasibility of our plans, the extent of our plans, including plans for relocation.

We have as one of our problems - Chuck - not only how we are going to identify the essential functions of Government that must be continued in any kind of an emergency, as well as the key people of Government who can discharge those responsibilities, but what are we going to do with the dependents of these people. We faced that issue for the first time in the Cuban crisis. There were extensive paper plans that contemplated the prelocation of or relocation of identified individuals in Government to other sites and physical locations. That was a paper plan. When we came so close to the

implementation of that plan, started tapping on the shoulder and indicating that in connection with your responsibility you are to go here or there, we found that these people were then faced with a choice of responsibility to their Government and responsibility to their families--as head of a family. In practically every instance, and I'm not so sure we can be critical of this--in practically every instance, the individual felt that his first responsibility was to his family and he had to make some kind of adequate arrangement for them before he was prepared or willing to leave his family in furtherance of his Governmental responsibility. I discussed that with the President and the consequence of that.

Since Cuba we have made arrangements that are a substantial improvement over what existed in October of 1962 to deal with the dependent problem. The Federal Government is not taking care of the dependents of these prelocated or relocated Government personnel, no money is being spent on this program, but actions have been taken that will, I think, give the Government employee who is subject to relocation or prelocation a certain peace of mind in knowing that his family is being taken care of.

Daly: Did you discuss that specific point with the President? What were his comments about the fellow who would not want to leave his family?

EAM: That was the first time that that subject had ever been discussed with him but he was not surprised by that reaction. I don't think that any of us had actually addressed ourselves to the question of what the response of the individual would be, but the President's comment was to the effect that that was completely understandable to him and obviously the plan had to be improved to the point where there was some sort of understanding as to what was going to happen to the dependents. He was very concerned with this aspect of the problem. Perhaps as much as with any other aspect of the problem. I believe he was more concerned as to how we were going to handle the personal end of it than he was with some of the other problems that we have in this program and that is the location of physical facilities, the funding--the development of these facilities and other things.

Daly: Did he say anything in regard to his own family?

EAM: No, I don't believe his own family came into it, except that his own sense of responsibility as a husband and father were obviously reflected in his attitude toward the reaction of other individuals in Government. Of course, he was familiar--I had briefed him previously, as had his military aide and naval aide on alternative arrangements that were available for the President and his family--and he was quite familiar with those.

Daly: Did he ever rehearse. . . .

EAM: To a limited degree. The only concern I had there was that we had these arrangements and facilities and they were quite satisfactory, but they all contemplated, to be successful, that the President would leave his desk at a particular time and would take such actions as would be necessary by him to get to one of these facilities. . . that were designed for his protection and safety. As I observed the President, not only during the Cuban crisis, but in other situations, I became quite convinced that the problem was going to be to get him to leave, and if an emergency like or greater than the Cuban crisis proved ultimately to be---were to develop---that a lot of planning that had been done perhaps would be ineffective, because I think it would have been a difficult thing to get President Kennedy away from his desk and away from his responsibilities as he was discharging them in the physical office of the President. . . in time to take advantage of some of these other plans.

Daly: Did you discuss that problem with him?

EAM: Some, but to a greater degree with Tazewell Shepard who was his Naval Aide, who was working directly during this period on the questions of Presidential security, as well as others. Captain Shepard shared my concern in that area and agreed with my feeling that the first problem was going to be to get the President to actually leave or move because of the deep sense of responsibility that he had and his desire to be personally involved up to the very last moment. This experience in this area was a new experience for many, including the President. I recall when we first had the meeting of the nonmilitary element of the Cabinet, that I referred to a few minutes ago, here were

Cabinet Officers whose Departments and who as heads of Departments had very important nonmilitary responsibilities--many of whom were quite unfamiliar with the nature of those responsibilities because they came into Government, they worked very hard in the discharge of their day-to-day peacetime operating responsibilities and, while this package of emergency responsibilities was recognized as being lodged somewhere in the Department, they did not have any sense of immediacy to it. I sensed that many of the Cabinet Officers had not gotten very deeply into this area of their responsibilities. There were some very grave concerns evidenced by officials and Cabinet members in those initial meetings and the lights that burned all night that week of October 22nd were illuminating discussions being held in the nonmilitary agencies and Cabinet Departments of Government where the top Executive level of Government was becoming familiar with some of these nonmilitary responsibilities.

The biggest "shot in the arm" these preparedness programs received in our whole experience, if not in the last decade, was the drama of the Cuban crisis. Take for example, Chuck, succession. I think this illustrates the problem. About 4 months prior to October 1962, we had made a review of the provisions that had been made within the Federal Departments of Government for legal succession to the top responsibilities in those Departments. We found that there was no uniformity in the arrangements that existed--that in some Departments there was legal provision for succession maybe only to a depth of three--all three of those individuals generally being together and in Washington, and beyond that, if those three people did not survive, any kind of an attack or an emergency that developed, there was just no legal provision for anybody to exercise the great responsibilities of some of these major Departments. So, consistent with our responsibilities, we developed some general guidance and distributed it to the Departments and agencies, asking that they take certain prescribed steps to insure two things: one, that there be adequate legal provision for succession to the Executive responsibility in every Department and agency of Government to a depth of about ten and that in providing for succession the problems of geography be recognized and, where possible, that regional personnel be included at some point in this succession list. This guidance went out about 3 months--at least 90 days--before Cuba and by October 22 we had enjoyed about a 20% response to that guidance. About 20% of the Departments and agencies had actually taken the actions. It was one of the agenda items at the first meeting of the nonmilitary members of the Cabinet, as

well as my first meeting with Independent Agency heads on October 23rd. I called their attention to this fact and need for it, and within 24 hours of that announcement on October 23rd, there was 100% compliance within Government, with the development of these succession procedures. That illustrates as well as anything the nature of the response to that problem.

Another thing that took place during that same week was of interest. There were great concerns developing on the part of Governors throughout the Nation and there is within the Governors' Conference, a committee -- the Governors' Conference Committee on Civil Defense and Post Attack Recovery -- and there were great concerns in the civil defense area. On Saturday, October 27, as things began to subside slightly, this Governors' Conference Committee met--convening here in Washington--first of all over at the Pentagon, where the Governors were briefed by John McCone of Central Intelligence Agency, on the nature of the problem. Steuart Pittman, who was at that time Assistant Secretary of Defense (Civil Defense), addressed the Governors on the Federal Civil Defense program and proposed actions. Then we came over from the Pentagon to the White House and I met with the President and the members of this Governors' Conference Committee, and they discussed with the President the nature of their concerns and action they thought might be necessary for them to take, particularly in the civil defense field in their respective States. Then we adjourned from the White House to my office across the street where we had a meeting until mid-afternoon on Saturday, October 27, reviewing for the Governors--on a broad basis--all actions of a nonmilitary character that had been taken in the Federal Government to deal with the problem of this threatened emergency. At the meeting of the President with the Governors, the Governors' Committee was chaired by Nelson Rockefeller. The President discussed with them in some detail the background of the actions he had announced a few days earlier on October 22nd and the reasons for it. He received their full support for the actions he had taken. He showed that day the strain that he had been under for the preceding ten days, but yet he was courteous; he gave a lot of his time to this Committee; he answered all the questions; he completely satisfied them that not only had he made the right decision but that the actions taken by the Federal Government in response to his decision were appropriately designed to meet the problems.

Daly: How did he show signs of strain?

EAM: He looked tired. I think he showed the physical evidence of the pressures that he had been under and the gravity of the decisions that he had made and the tensions that attended those decisions that followed Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of that week. He was beginning -- we were all beginning at that time -- to feel that some of the things we thought might happen were not going to happen. I think on that particular day -- on Saturday of that week -- he was showing the full strain of the week that he had been through.

Daly: You made some comments -- you mentioned that one of the problems you had with him was a reluctance to think about personal safety in a nuclear disaster. What were some of your other tough problems?

EAM: Well, the nature of my responsibilities, Chuck, which we have discussed broadly in earlier discussions, were such that the things that I had occasion to deal with him about with some frequency were things to which he was generally very responsive. For example, during the period of a number of months, when we were deeply involved in stockpile policy, stockpile decisions, that was an item that was carried rather high on his agenda of domestic matters and he was perfectly accessible, he was -- he understood the problem and background of it -- he was always anxious to discuss it. I suppose the most difficult things I took to him less frequently because it was not necessary except in the actual Cuban crisis -- to talk to him about those things. I had very little in the way of problems because the things I was talking to him about were not particularly controversial, once a basic policy decision was made, and they were things that he was interested in hearing about.

We had some difficult times in connection with some petroleum studies which he initiated and in which we participated, and in which there were substantial disagreements within the Federal family. We had a series of meetings with reference to such questions as the continuation of the import controls on residual fuel oil, etc. He would, on occasion, evidence some irritation or displeasure as we got into those areas of discussion because they were sticky areas, politically and otherwise, and they weren't very pleasant things to have to discuss. They weren't -- in the great, grand scheme of things, they weren't the most serious problems, the most pressing problems, coming before him.